

# FOCUS ON FAMILY PREVENTION

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## Abuse of the Elderly

Only recently have social science researchers and a small number of practicing professionals begun to look seriously at the possibility that some elderly persons are being abused by family members with whom they are living or on whom they depend for some kinds of assistance.

Preliminary research indicates that abuse of the elderly may take many forms. It may be physical, sexual, psychological or financial. It can be intentional hurting or it may be neglectful ignoring. It can be as blatant as physical or sexual assault or as subtle as isolating, humiliating or refusing access to grandchildren. Some kinds of abuse seem unique to the elderly. One of the most common is financial or material abuse, that is, coercion or trickery used to obtain money or goods belonging to the elderly person. Over use or under use of medication and physical restraint are other forms of abuse which are sometimes used to control the behavior of dependent elderly persons.

Little is known about the prevalence

of elder abuse in Canada. A few small studies have been conducted in attempts to determine the extent and the seriousness of the problem. Surveys of small numbers of professionals who have contact with elderly clients were conducted in Manitoba in 1982 and in Alberta in 1985. The Manitoba study indicated that approximately 2.2 percent of the elderly clients of the professionals surveyed had experienced some abuse. The Alberta study was too small to generalize from its findings. The 322 respondents who returned their questionnaires identified 500 cases that had come to their attention during the previous five years. Thirty percent of the reported cases were emotional and physical abuse including 108 cases involving beatings and other types of bodily assault. Both studies indicate that the most common kind of abuse of which the respondents were aware was financial abuse. Forty percent of the Alberta cases were this type. They involved misuse of funds, abuse of trusteeships and withholding of pension cheques.

In both Canadian and U.S. studies, researchers are finding that the majority of those being abused are women over the age of 75 who are dependent on their abusers in some way. Some are victims of spousal abuse, particularly wife abuse that has been going on for years. Other studies show that some elderly parents are being abused by sons and daughters who are dependent on them for a place to live and/or for financial help.

The abusers for the most part seem to be sons, daughters or spouses. A host of causes and contributing factors are common. Middle-aged or older persons may have insufficient time, energy, space, money or personal resources to easily care for an elderly relative or partner. Contemporary housing and life styles are not conducive to the viable operation of a multi-generational household. The stress created in such situations sometimes prompts the use of abusive measures in attempts to cope. Unresolved family conflicts may continue to be played out when the elderly parent becomes dependent. A non-supportive, confrontational family style of interacting may escalate into abusive behavior. A generally negative attitude toward aging which seems →



\*Health and Welfare Canada

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prevalent in North American society is probably also a contributing factor. This attitude, which can manifest itself in feelings of fear and dread, may be turned against already elderly persons in abusive ways.

Elder abuse is difficult to detect. The abused person is typically isolated and even when there is some contact s/he usually tries to hide the reality of the abuse. Shame or fear of more abuse contribute to the silence. If abuse is suspected, it is important that the

question be asked carefully and sensitively so that help can be offered.

Not until more persons in the community become aware of elder abuse and begin to address the issue in a variety of ways will its pain and prevalence be reduced.

# What to do about Elder Abuse

Elder abuse like other forms of family violence must first be acknowledged as a problem serious enough to warrant attention. The prevalence and seriousness of all types of family violence have historically been denied when they have first been brought to public attention. The issue of elder abuse is at that stage now, but awareness is increasing and the reality is becoming more difficult to deny.

Some cases may be serious enough to require police intervention. For example, assault and fraud are crimes, whether they occur within families or among strangers.

Therapy may be required to assist the abuser to overcome his or her way of interacting with the abused person.

Knowledge of other types of family violence indicates that this kind of help will not likely be sought unless someone outside the family recognizes the abuse and assists whoever is involved to seek help.

Many cases could be addressed by offering support for the families to assist them with their caretaking responsibilities. Education about the aging process, relief in times of stress, and support groups within which to express feelings and learn ways of coping may all be helpful. Not only can these kinds of activities be helpful to families already experiencing abuse, they can also be very effective in preventing abuse.



## Did You Know?

- The Canadian Council on Social Development is funding the establishment of a National Council on Battered Women. Alberta representatives Jean Reynolds, President of the Alberta Council on Women's Shelters and Jackie Gaboury, former Director of Odyssey House, Grande Prairie, attended the founding meeting in Ottawa in January.
- Health and Welfare Canada is providing funds to Family Service Canada and the Canadian Child Welfare Association to work together on a number of initiatives for the purpose of increasing and improving the sharing of information and communication among persons and agencies providing treatment services to child sexual abuse victims, families and offenders.
- The Alberta Council of

**Women's Shelters**, with the assistance of funds from Secretary of State, Canada has opened an office in Edmonton. Sharing the position of Coordinator are Loretta Bertol and Roberta Carey, Phone 488-2470.

• New Brunswick's Family Services Act provides for the investigation of and provision of services to abused disabled and elderly adults as well as children. The legislation allows for the removal and possible detention of any person whose presence may be causing abuse.

• Ontario's Law Society of Upper Canada has developed a comprehensive training program about wife abuse for family law practitioners. The program in print and audio visual format entitled "How to Represent the Battered Client" may be viewed at the

Office for the Prevention of Family Violence Resource Center.

• Dr. Murray Straus from the University of New Hampshire, Family Research Laboratory, in a presentation February 14 at the University of Alberta, discussed the connections between "illegitimate" or unacceptable violence such as rape and violence in families and legitimate violence, that is, the use of violence for socially acceptable purposes such as capital punishment of homicide offenders, support for military organizations and the subscription rates for consumption of violent magazines. His research suggests a strong correlation. He closed his remarks by saying that the two most powerful ways to reduce family violence are to "empower women" and "stop hitting kids."

# Community News

## Calgary

Dave Wellings of Alberta Social Services has been working closely with the Calgary Public School Board in the preparation of a policy and procedures manual — Child Protection: A School's Responsibility. One of the many issues addressed in the manual is that of the particular responsibilities that school personnel have in relation to the Alberta Child Welfare Act and the Young Offenders Act. The manual is being distributed throughout the Calgary public school system. Workshops are now being planned for all principals, vice-principals, counsellors and resource room teachers. A similar project is underway with the Calgary Catholic School Board and the rural districts in the Region.

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The Social Services Department of Kerby Centre for Seniors now documents cases of elder abuse that come to their attention and offers assistance. The centre also offers workshops entitled "You and Your Aging Parent" and "You and Your Adult Children" to assist in the prevention and alleviation of stressful relationships in families with elderly relatives.

## Northeast

Alberta Social Services has appointed a child abuse and family violence prevention coordinator, Myrna Lee, to work with District Offices in the Region on child sexual abuse and with communities on all aspects of family violence prevention. The Regional Office is committed to addressing these problems in a vigorous and coordinated way in Northeastern Alberta.

## Northwest

A major research study on family violence began in Peace River, Whitecourt and Alexis Indian Reservation, May 1. The 28 month study, funded by Solicitor General, Canada operates out of the Office for the Prevention of Family Violence with direction from local committees in each of the three communities. It will examine the legal and social responses to cases of family, child, wife, and elder abuse; look for ways to improve the responses; recommend changes; and then monitor the effects of the changes. The study is designed to determine what community responses might be effective in rural Canada.

## South

The Lethbridge Chapter of the Alberta Home Economics Association invited Dr. Jim Check of York University to conduct a seminar on pornography, February 7 in Lethbridge. Dr. Check described several research studies he has conducted which examined the effects of viewing pornographic videos on men of a variety of ages and backgrounds and the views of the general population on whether violent and sexually explicit material should be shown on public television. Dr. Check is supervising a study of the relationship between the use of pornography and the abuse of women.

## Central

Help for Victims of Family Violence was formed in 1985 to address the needs of victims of family violence and sexual assault in the town of Sundre. The program has now been expanded to include the County of Mountainview. Help's services include a 24-hour crisis line offering information, support and referrals; transportation services in the county; a bi-weekly support group for battered women; and a public awareness program.

## Edmonton

Congratulations to the organizers of the Family Violence Conference held in Edmonton March 4, 5, and 6. It was an outstanding success with over 900 people attending. Participants had an abundance of speeches and workshops from which to choose. Catalyst Theater led off the first full day with dramatizations of some of the dynamics and issues related to family violence and the responses to it on the part of various professionals and community agencies. The remainder of the time was filled with more than 50 presentations on a multitude of issues from prevention to treatment for victims, perpetrators and other family members; from causes to consequences; from issues related to particular professions to those related to particular populations. "It was the best conference on this topic I have ever attended," said key-note speaker, Peter Jaffe of London's Family Violence Coordinating Committee. Audio tapes for many of the presentations are available from Kennedy Recordings, R.R. 5 Edmonton, T5P 4B7, phone 470-0013.

## Calendar of Events

### May 24-25 Ottawa

Child Sexual Abuse (en français avec David Finkelhor) — subsidy available for transportation.

Le Regroupement d'Intervenants Francophones sur les agressions sexuelles

Contact: Francine Chretien  
Centre de Services Communautaire de Vanier  
330 Lajoie  
Vanier, Ontario K1A 7H8  
Phone: (613) 744-2892

### June 3-5 Saint John, New Brunswick

National Symposium on Family Violence

Contact: Muriel McQueen Fergusson Foundation  
South Bay  
Box 3566, Station "B"  
Saint John, New Brunswick E2M 4Y1

### June 14-17 Toronto

Focus on Child Abuse: Challenges and Achievements

Contact: Ontario Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse  
25 Spadina Road  
Toronto, Ontario M5R 2S9  
Phone: (416) 965-1900

### June 25-27 St. Albert

Kinsmen-RCMP Child Abuse Prevention Celebrity Weekend

Contact: Constable Michaud  
Phone (403) 458-7700

### July 6-9 Durham, New Hampshire, U.S.A.

Third National Family Violence Research Conference

Contact: Angela Browne  
Family Violence Research Laboratory  
University of New Hampshire  
Durham, New Hampshire 03824

### July 9-11 Durham, New Hampshire, U.S.A.

Family Violence Research for Practitioners and Policy Makers

Contact: Nanci Burns  
Family Violence Research Laboratory  
University of New Hampshire  
Durham, New Hampshire 03824

## Book Review

**Abuse and Maltreatment of the Elderly: Causes and Interventions**  
Edited by Jordan I. Kosberg  
Littleton, Massachusetts: John Wrights PSG Inc., 1983.

This collection of articles, one of the few books available on elder abuse, attempts to provide an overview of the causes and consequences of victimization of elderly persons and suggest some possible interventions. It addresses abuse and maltreatment both within families and within the larger society. It is of interest to professional as well as lay persons.

Leading off is Emilio C. Viano with **Victimology: An Overview** in which he looks at the concept of victimology from an historical perspective and how in recent times the victimization of the elderly can be placed within the context in which aging itself has been made into a process of progressive victimization.

Richard L. Douglass and Tom Hickey in **Domestic Neglect and Abuse of the Elderly: Research Findings and a Systems Perspective for Service Delivery Planning** provide an excellent review and analysis of research in the United States. They point out that different types of service providers and professionals assume different causes of neglect and abuse of the elderly and that without active coordination and cross interpretation of theory and practice, emerging prevention and intervention system components are likely to be at cross purposes.

Several authors discuss the particular characteristics of elderly persons that make them vulnerable to abuse, the motivations and resources of families caring for elderly relatives and the stresses and need for support of such families.

Protective services for the elderly are

examined and discussed in a general way and in a particular way based on experience in Connecticut, which has an ombudsman for elderly people and an Elderly Protective Services Law.

The role of health care professionals in detecting and intervening is addressed in two articles.

The remainder of the twenty-six readings in this book address abuse of the elderly in the community. Although all of the material is based on American experiences and conditions, there is much of value in the book for all North Americans concerned about elder abuse.

You may contact the Office for the Prevention of Family Violence at the following numbers: 427-7599 or 427-5961.

**"FOCUS: FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION"** is a quarterly publication of the Office for the Prevention of Family Violence. Submissions for future issues, especially news about community activities, are welcome. To put your name on the mailing list for additional copies, contact the Office. Address all correspondence to:

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